

Nordidactica – Journal of Humanities and Social Science Education
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Nordidactica 2013:1
ISSN 2000-9879
The online version of this paper can be found at: www.kau.se/nordidactica

Nordidactica
- Journal of Humanities and Social
Science Education

2013:1

Schools, Democratic Socialization and Political Participation: Political Activity and Passivity among Swedish Youths

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The present text is based on a key note lecture ('Civic Education, Democracy and Political Participation') delivered at the symposium Globalization of School Subjects – Challenges for Civics, History, Geography and Religious Education, Karlstad University, 13–14 December, 2012. Drawing on recent developments in research on political participation and civic engagement, the text starts out with a discussion about different ways of understanding political passivity. Subsequently, the text turns to a brief analysis of ways in which schools may provide young people with political skills and competencies needed in a democratic society. Three dimensions of political citizenship are highlighted: political efficacy, political literacy, and political participation; and the analysis focuses on the impact of a number of different school-related factors on these three 'citizenship competencies'.

KEY WORDS: POLITICAL PARTICIPATION, CIVIC ENGAGEMENT, CIVIC EDUCATION, POLITICAL PASSIVITY, SCHOOL SOCIALIZATION

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Political Participation and Civic Engagement in Decline?

Research on political participation in contemporary democracies has, for a number of years, been concerned with declining levels of civic engagement and party membership, low electoral turnout and eroding public confidence in the institutions of representative democracy, among young as well as middle-aged and old citizens. In the post-industrial societies, it would seem, citizens have become increasingly disengaged from the conventional channels of political participation. Political passivity, or perhaps quite simply the lack of conventional forms of participation, has generally been considered to be a problem for democracy, then.

At the same time, there are different notions of political passivity in the literature. Some scholars seem to believe that passivity (non-activity) is harmful, while others seem to be quite relaxed about it. Such notions have not only to do with actual observations of citizen behaviour; it is also a matter of different normative approaches. This becomes evident when looking at the normative aspects associated with the three conventional models of democracy typically found in political science textbooks. The Weber/Schumpeter based *minimalist model of democracy* accepts passivity; indeed, it even embraces it. Democracy is not about mass participation; rather, non-qualified (and even qualified) citizens should keep out of politics in-between elections. A radically different position is found among the advocates of *participatory democracy*. Here, political passivity is unequivocally understood as a bad thing; it constitutes a threat to democracy. As many people as possible *ought* to get involved in politics on a regular basis, since it facilitates good decision-making and fosters responsible citizens. The *representative model of democracy* represents an intermediate position in this respect. Here, as suggested by Almond and Verba in a seminal work on political culture (1963), a sense of civic duty should ideally be combined with some level of passivity, in the sense that the incumbents should be left to decide on most political issues on their own, in order to facilitate effective government.

In addition to these normative questions about the best way of organizing a democratic political system, the issue of political passivity has of course been a standing feature in the post-war discussion on the quality of democracy. This literature encompasses both *optimistic* and *pessimistic* interpretations of current developments. The pessimistic interpretations include Putnam's analysis of the state of democracy in the US (2000); and similar concerned voices have resonated in a number of other democracies worldwide, e.g., in Western Europe, in Scandinavia, and in South-East Asia, where scholars have pointed to an ever-widening gap between citizens and politicians, declining political support, and general feelings of disaffection.

On a more optimistic note, it has been argued that such fears are exaggerated; the development of 'critical citizens' is not the same thing as the erosion of democracy, and the assumption of the decline and fall of civic engagement is, at best, premature (e.g. Norris 2002; Berger 2009). In the more recent literature, we thus find some interpretations of current political developments where passivity – in the form of

declining levels of conventional political participation and civic engagement – is not necessarily considered to be a threat in itself to democracy. Rather, we are told, this is more or less what we should expect from postmodern citizens. They avoid traditional forms of political participation, but they also develop new forms of political behavior and stay interested in societal affairs.

The notion of ‘monitorial citizens’ (Schudson 1996; 1998) constitutes one of the most optimistic interpretations of citizens’ political behavior in contemporary democracies. Schudson claims that citizens today are not politically passive, even if they do not formally participate in politics; rather, they are politically involved as ‘monitorial citizens’, which is ‘a critical and observational form of citizenship, avoiding any routine-based or institutionalized forms of political participation’ (Hooghe and Dejaeghere 2007: 250–251). Thus, the decline in conventional forms of participation does not entail a crisis of democracy; rather, ‘monitorial citizens’ supposedly stay interested in and informed about politics, and display sufficiently high levels of political trust. The low level of formal political participation reflects rational decision-making. Only when there is a felt need to intervene will the ‘monitorial citizen’ act – but, up until then, she or he stays out of politics.

The academic debate about the state of Western democracies has been particularly animated when it comes to young people’s political involvement. Some scholars have pointed to the alarmingly low levels of young people’s engagement in politics, like membership in parties, voting in elections, and activities in associational life (Marsch, O’Toole and Jones 2007; Dalton 2008). Others have argued that, even if young people undoubtedly are less engaged in politics than middle-aged citizens, increasingly more young people have become involved ‘in emerging forms of civic engagement that take place outside the institutionalized sphere of politics’ (Stolle and Hooghe 2011; cf. Flanagan 2013). Also, the literature has covered *new styles of citizenship*, manifested e.g. in activity on the Internet, through political consumption (Micheletti 2003; Micheletti and Stolle 2009) or in highly diversified repertoires of engagement (Hustinx et al. 2012).

Varieties of passivity

In a recent study (Amnå and Ekman 2013), we have tested the notion of a ‘monitorial’ approach among young people. Drawing on unique data on Swedish adolescents, collected within a research programme on political socialization at Örebro University (Amnå et al. 2009), we demonstrate empirically that what is sometimes dismissed as ‘passivity’ (i.e. the lack of manifest activity) actually consists of distinctly different orientations. In order to facilitate the analysis, we first constructed a simple framework that distinguished between – on the one hand – those interested in politics and societal affairs and those uninterested, and – on the other hand – active youths and passive youths. Subsequently, we included a number of questions about skills and competencies typically associated with the notion of

political citizenship (like political knowledge, interest, and media consumption) into the analysis.

Our research clearly demonstrated that the ‘monitorial’ or – which is the label we prefer – the ‘standby’ category actually exists (Amnå and Ekman 2013). In fact, we may identify four distinct groups when it comes to citizenship orientations: *active* youths (who score high on both our measures of political interest and political participation); those on *standby* (scoring high on interest, but only average on participation); the *unengaged* (scoring low on both interest and participation); and the *disillusioned* (scoring low on participation and lowest of all groups on interest). Interestingly, just like in a recent study on young people in Belgium and the Netherlands (Hustinx et al. 2012), the ‘standby’ category is the largest group in the Swedish sample, suggesting that being on standby/a monitorial citizen is a common orientation in contemporary democracies.

Furthermore, the standby group stands out in meaningful ways when analysing how the four distinct citizenship orientations differ on a number of measures designed to tap political competencies among young people, like efficacy, political ambition, feelings about politics, news consumption, attempts at influencing parents and friends, and the habit of bringing up political and societal issues during class. In short, being on ‘standby’ is actually something rather close – but not identical – to an ‘active’ orientation, and at the same time, something distinctly different from a passive/alienated orientation to politics and societal affairs. This means, then, that if research on political participation should be able to contribute to our understanding of the dynamics of contemporary democracies, the analysis has to go beyond the simplistic passive/active dichotomy.

Turning next to a discussion about the role of schools in fostering participatory attitudes and political orientations among young people (i.e. political socialization), an interesting question is what the notion of standby or monitorial citizens entails, when it comes to assessments of the functioning of schools.

Making Citizens in the Classroom

Political socialization is a multifaceted process, determined by a large number of factors such as family, friends, media and religion. Aside from the primary importance of family socialization, it is conventionally assumed that schools as political socialization contexts are particularly important, for two reasons: the child’s extended exposure to political messages transmitted through teachers and friends at school, and the supposed ability of the state to *control* the way schools teach students about democracy and political issues as well as provide democratic education in practice, e.g. through shared decision-making or deliberative discussion in the classroom (cf. Englund 2000). However, the extent to which schools may succeed in educating democratic citizens is a matter of dispute. The relative impact of schools in this respect remains unclear, partly as a result of lack of adequate data that in a proper way take socioeconomic factors at the individual level into account.

In research project at Örebro University (Amnå et al. 2010), we have investigated the role of schools in fostering political citizens, i.e. providing them with competencies and skills needed to actually realize their status as political actors in a democratic society (Ekman and Zetterberg 2011). Using data from the 2009 *International Civic and Citizenship Study* (ICCS), conducted by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA), we have information on 3,464 Swedish 14-year olds' political attitudes as well as their present and anticipated civic engagement and political participation. The dataset also contains an ambitious political literacy test. The student information is paired with school data (a school questionnaire), in order to tap the effect of different school contexts. In addition, we have the advantage of having access to census data (from *Statistics Sweden*), which gives us the possibility to move beyond the use of subjective measures of socioeconomic status (such as the students' estimations of the number of books at home; cf. Torney-Purta 2001).

Schools and political citizenship

It has often been noted that education has a positive effect on the vitality of democracy, as education seems to be directly related to political participation; the higher the level of education, the higher levels of political participation and civic engagement. Civic education, in particular, supposedly matters for knowledge about politics and participatory attitudes (Niemi and Junn 1998; Broman 2009).

Furthermore, analyses of the IEA's *Civic Education Study* (CIVED 1999), the predecessor of ICCS 2009, have demonstrated an independent school effect on political literacy. Certain teaching practices – e.g. deliberative discussion and an open classroom climate – proved to have a positive impact on the young students' knowledge about democracy and societal affairs (Amadeo et al. 2002).

At the same time, there is a general need for considering the possibility of a self-selection bias when trying to establish the effect of education on political knowledge or political attitudes: certain classes or programs are populated by certain students (cf. Ekman 2007). In short, the students' family backgrounds need to be included in any analysis of the possible impact of education on political orientations.

Thus, when it comes to citizenship competencies like political literacy, there is no precise scholarly agreement regarding the role of schools. Considering the rich data at hand, with extensive information about the schools (i.e. 'macro' school factors) and with a large number of questions related to the practices within the classroom (i.e. 'micro' school factors), we are in a favorable position to single out which school factors, if any, that are positively associated with students' political citizenship competencies.

Here, in order to analyze the role of schools for political socialization, we have investigated three core dimensions of political citizenship: *internal political efficacy*, *political literacy* and *political participation* (Ekman and Zetterberg 2011). Internal political efficacy refers to the individual's belief about his or her own competence to understand and to make a difference in political matters. Political literacy is a key

condition for being able to raise one's voice in society. In our study, this dimension of political citizenship was investigated with the help of a comprehensive political knowledge test, used in ICCS 2009. The test examines the students' cognitive as well as interpretative skills (cf. Schultz et al. 2010). Political participation, finally, may of course be tapped using a number of different indicators. Here, we use two, reflecting a fairly broad notion of what constitutes 'political participation' (cf. Teorell, Torcal and Montero 2007). To begin with, we measured students' participation in school democracy activities with a six-item additive index. Moreover, we analyzed *latent* political participation (cf. Ekman and Amnå 2012), by examining students' *anticipated* electoral participation (i.e. voting) – with an additive index based on five items (see Ekman and Zetterberg 2011 for full measures and constructs).

The independent variables and the analytical model

As for the independent variables, we examined four school factors that operate at slightly different levels. Two of them take the 'macro' context of schools into account, by focusing on institutional as well as compositional aspects. *Institutional* aspects have to do with the role of school structure, i.e. if the school is privately or publicly administered. In Sweden, students are since the 1990s free to choose between private (independent) schools and public (municipal) schools. *Compositional* aspects have to do with the possible role that the socioeconomic embeddedness of schools might have for students' political socialization (e.g. Almgren 2006). For instance, it is quite possible that a student is positively affected – in relation to some aspect of the citizenship competencies – by having a large share of peers with well-educated parents, even if he or she personally comes from a family with no academic background. Here, to tap such compositional effects, we aggregated the education level among parents to the classroom level, i.e. transforming the variable into a compositional measure (simply by using the official census data to calculate a class mean for the share of students that have at least one parent with university education). Because of the way the sampling was carried out in ICCS, 'a school' for all practical purposes equals 'a class'. With few exceptions, one class per school was selected in the Swedish part of ICCS, and within each class, all students were part of the sample.

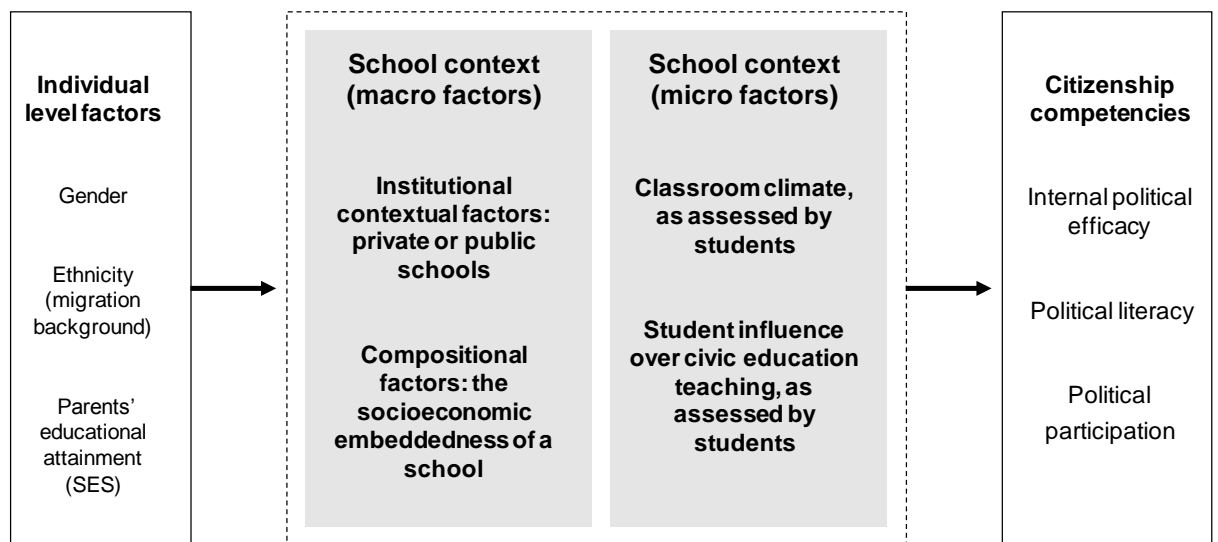
As for the classroom factors (or 'micro' school factors), these were tapped by using two composite indices, based on the ICCS student data. The questions deal with the students' evaluation of their teachers' ability to create a positive and open classroom environment, as well as the students' perceived ability to influence the organization of the civic education teaching.

We know from previous research that educational achievement is not a simple function of the student's innate ability. Social, demographic and other background variables matter as well. In our study, three individual background variables were included: *gender*, *ethnicity*, and *socioeconomic status* (SES). Ethnicity in this context refers to migration background, and we made a simple distinction between students with Swedish background and students with immigrant background (i.e. born outside of Sweden and/or having both parents born outside of Sweden). In the present

analysis, we used official statistics of the parents' educational attainment as a measure of SES. The full model is outlined in Figure 1.

FIGURE 1.

The analytical model



The statistical method we used was Hierarchical Linear Modeling (HLM). This technique is conventionally used for analyses in which the data are structured at multiple levels: both at the individual level and at a contextual/structural level (here: school level). It is also useful when we have two different datasets, as in this case; one for school factors and one for student data. To put it simple, HLM is useful when assessing the relative impact of a contextual factor – here, the macro and micro school factors – on an individual's values, attitudes or behavior.

Pessimistic conclusions?

Among the school factors in our model (Figure 1), only one of them seemed to be positively related to the students' sense of internal *political efficacy*: the socioeconomic embeddedness of the school. In classes in which a relatively large number of students have at least one parent with a university degree, there also seems to be a relatively large share of the students who believe that they understand political issues and may act as active political citizens – taking also individual characteristics into account. To put it differently, a 14-year old who spends time with 14-year olds with well-educated parents seems to have better chances to develop political efficacy beliefs, compared to a 14-year old who spends time among peers with less educated parents. Importantly, this is irrespective of the 14-year old's own family background.

As for the other three school characteristics (school structure, classroom climate, and student influence over civic education instruction), none of them had a statistically significant relationship with internal political efficacy. Rather, individual

characteristics appear to be better suited to account for the variation across students: boys tend to have higher levels of internal political efficacy than girls; students with migration background are more politically efficacious than those with Swedish background; and students with highly educated parents have more confidence in their ability to understand and influence politics, than students with less educated parents.

The analysis of the role of school factors on *political literacy* revealed a similar pattern. Again, there was a positive impact of the socioeconomic embeddedness of the school. Students attending classes with peers with well-educated parents generally score higher on the ICCS 2009 political literacy test, than students in classes with peers from less ‘academic’ families. We may thus identify a distinct compositional effect here as well (cf. Almgren 2006).

Our final dimension of political citizenship – *political participation* – has to do with both latent and manifest behavior. In our study, we covered democratic participation in school, as well as the 14-year olds’ prognosticated (future) electoral participation. To start with the former, we found that one ‘macro’ and one ‘micro’ school factor mattered for students’ participation in school democratic activities. Students attending a private school appear to participate to a higher extent than those in public schools, *ceteris paribus*. Moreover, a student is more likely to take part in school democracy activities if he or she attends a class in which a large share of the students perceives that they have an influence on the civic education instruction.

As for anticipated electoral participation, finally, we found that the socioeconomic embeddedness of the school was positively related to prognosticated voting activities. To put it differently, a student who attends a class with a large share of peers with well-educated parents is more likely than others to foresee future electoral participation, even if he or she personally comes from a family with no academic tradition. None of the other school factors appeared to have an impact on future voting behavior.

Taken together, the analysis suggested that *who* the students are populating a class appears to be more important than *what* is exactly going on in the classroom. This conclusion may sound pessimistic, as it would seem to question what schools can actually do to level out inequalities in background resources among students, that matter for their future role at political citizens. For example, what we find is that 14-year olds with well-educated parents – spending time among peers with equally well-educated parents – are those, in particular, who say that they as adults will participate in politics and elections. 14-year olds with less educated parents or with immigrant background prognosticate lower levels of participation.

Still, before we conclude that schools cannot really make a difference in this respect, we should consider the discussion about monitorial or standby citizens. Perhaps there is no need to over-emphasize the importance of political activity (e.g. voting): schools may still provide young people from different backgrounds with latent political competencies such as efficacy or the habit of monitoring politics – and maybe this is good enough? At the same time, we should not underestimate the potential danger of schools only re-producing social inequalities. For example, when it comes to political literacy, our analysis clearly demonstrates that young students with

scarce family resources have a harder time than others acquiring political knowledge, which is an important aspect of the standby orientation. Also, in future research, we need to analyze the role of schools in relation to other socialization arenas. For instance, in no other country in Europe is the effect of the parents' educational attainment as strong as in Sweden (cf. Schulz et al. 2010). Consequently, the tentative conclusion indicated here – that schools mainly matter as political socialization *contexts* and less as political socialization *agents* – might be attributed to factors related specifically to Swedish society. For this reason, further contextually nuanced analyses are needed to get a more comprehensive picture of schools as arenas of political socialization.

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